
TESTIMONY

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Education

Respectfully Submitted by: Vermont Agency of Education

Subject: Response to Testimony related to HHB and Chronic Absenteeism

Date: April 28, 2026

Executive Summary

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Harassment, Hazing, and Bullying as it relates to H.930 and H.931. H.930 represents an important opportunity to establish more consistent, equitable, and prevention-oriented approaches to student attendance across Vermont. In particular, it lays a strong foundation for shared definitions, improved data collection, and a coordinated statewide focus on early intervention.

As discussion of the bill has evolved, there has been increased interest in addressing the relationship between absenteeism and Harassment, Hazing, and Bullying (HHB). The Agency shares this commitment and recognizes the significant impact HHB can have on student well-being, engagement, and school attendance. At the same time, HHB is a complex issue that benefits from a comprehensive, intentional policy approach. For this reason, the Agency has **significant concerns with making significant statutory changes related to HHB this legislative session.**

H.930 – Addressing Attendance

Recent testimony has demonstrated widespread interest in further examining the root causes of absenteeism, with a particular interest in addressing Harassment, Hazing, and Bullying (HHB). The Agency remains equally committed to improving and strengthening state-level efforts in HHB prevention, response, and restoration. However, that work requires a cohesive, intentional approach to achieve meaningful, sustainable change. Isolated additions to H.930, such as requirements for data reporting around HHB-related absences, will not produce actionable or reliable information to truly understand the impact of HHB or to improve student outcomes.

Adding HHB-related absence categories within attendance law is unlikely to yield clear or actionable data and may create unintended confusion in implementation. More importantly, it may limit the ability to fully address HHB through the broader, prevention-focused strategies that are currently underway.



Additionally, the Agency recommends that the model policy on the prevention of chronic absenteeism and truancy not be required to include “protocols to respond effectively to bullying and harassment”. This would be duplicating a requirement from 16 VSA 570, which already requires the Secretary to develop and update “model harassment, hazing, and bullying prevention policies”.

The Agency respectfully recommends:

- **Maintaining the focus of H.930** on strengthening attendance systems, definitions, and early intervention strategies;
- **Reconsidering the inclusion of HHB-related amendments** within this bill, including the designation of HHB-related absences as a separate category as well as requiring the model policy on the prevention of chronic absenteeism and truancy to include “protocols to respond effectively to bullying and harassment”; and
- **Continuing to advance HHB policy through a dedicated, comprehensive effort** that reflects the full scope and complexity of the issue.

H.931 – Miscellaneous Education Bill

The Agency does not support language proposed for inclusion in the miscellaneous education bill, H.931, that would expand membership and duties of the HHB Advisory Council. The Council has only recently reconvened under new leadership and is actively engaged in significant ongoing work. Further, several of the proposed duties directly conflict with the responsibilities of the Agency of Education to provide high quality, equitable access to education, and to supervise and direct the execution of the laws relating to the public schools and ensure compliance. Expanding the structure and scope at this stage could disrupt and delay progress toward a more comprehensive, systemwide strategy to address HHB. Because of the complex, layered, and real time process, the Agency strongly recommends including the Vermont Superintendents Association and Vermont Principals Association in any future changes. All proposed changes should align with the Agency’s broader HHB strategy in a manner that complements, not disrupts, ongoing efforts.

Background and Statutory Framework for HHB Prevention

Vermont provisions for HHB prevention, including data reporting, are codified in law in 16 VSA 570 et al. Vermont’s approach to addressing HHB is grounded in Act 129 of 2012, which established updated definitions and requirements for HHB prevention, reporting, and response. Under the law, school boards are



required to adopt and enforce HHB prevention policies that are at least as comprehensive as the model policy maintained by the Agency of Education (AOE). Boards must also ensure that students and caregivers receive notice of these policies using age-appropriate language.

Act 129 assigns several responsibilities to the AOE, including maintaining the HHB model policy, convening an HHB Prevention Advisory Council, and supporting the Council with delivering an annual report to the General Assembly. While the statute emphasizes prevention in its intent, the required elements of the model policy are primarily focused on reporting, investigation, and response. These include strict timelines for initiating and completing investigations, designation of HHB coordinators, minimal staff training requirements, and protections against retaliation.

Over the past two years, AOE has gathered substantial input to inform future HHB policy and practice, including public comment submissions, an email campaign, advisory council surveys, and youth-focused research such as [*Elevating Youth Voice in School Safety*](#). Collectively, these inputs highlight consistent concerns regarding the usability, equity, and effectiveness of Vermont's current HHB framework. Stakeholders emphasized the need for clearer guidance, stronger prevention supports, developmentally and age-appropriate responses, and consistent implementation across schools and districts. At the same time, limitations in available data, particularly the absence of information on incidents not accepted for investigation, have constrained the state's ability to assess outcomes and ensure accountability.

Response to Recent Amendments

As previously noted, the Agency strongly discourages including specific provisions related to HHB prevention within H.930. This is not due to any lack of recognition of the importance of this work; rather, it reflects the scope and complexity of the issue, which warrants deeper discussion and a dedicated, standalone piece of legislation instead of being incorporated as a limited component of the proposed attendance bill. The Agency further recommends that any future amendments to 16 VSA § 570 be considered within a comprehensive, intentional, and data-driven strategy for HHB prevention and response, rather than as a subsection of absenteeism law.

The Agency recommends that the inclusion of absences from “incidents of hazing, harassment, or bullying;” as a category of excused absences be struck from the bill language. The Agency recognizes that HHB can have significant physical, mental, and emotional impacts on students, and absences due to health or mental health concerns or limitations that are related to an open, ongoing, or previous HHB incident should be reported as a “health or mental health absence.” The



proposed category does not provide enough specificity to address the potential short- and long-term impacts of HHB, and is likely to create significant confusion about the appropriate use of this code. It does not account for key distinctions, such as whether the absence is related to a reported incident, whether any interventions or supports have been provided otherwise, or the role of the student (e.g., target, bystander, or student engaging in harmful behavior). Captured as a broad category, it would not produce meaningful or actionable data to inform HHB prevention efforts and would primarily reflect how often students or families are self-identifying their absence as “related to HHB”.

The Agency’s comprehensive approach to HHB prevention involves an in-depth review of existing data collected around HHB incidents, and an alignment to meaningful data practices informed by national examples. Future data collections are expected to better capture the impact of HHB, including time missed from school, class, or activities related to a pending or completed HHB investigation. For this reason, the Agency does not recommend that this requirement be included as a specific subset of absenteeism law.

Additionally, the Agency recommends that the model policy on the prevention of chronic absenteeism and truancy not be required to include “protocols to respond effectively to bullying and harassment”. This language appears to duplicate an already existing requirement from 16 VSA 570, which requires the Secretary to develop and update “model harassment, hazing, and bullying prevention policies”. Including this duplicative requirement in a policy for preventing chronic absenteeism and truancy is misaligned, will tend to confuse the reader, and will overwhelm a policy targeted to chronic absenteeism by focusing to a distracting degree on harassment and bullying, which is the subject of another set of policies and procedures.

Education Strategy for HHB Prevention

The Agency of Education is engaged in a multi-year prevention-focused, equity-centered strategy for HHB Prevention that includes:

1. Targeted updates to statewide model policy for HHB Prevention and Response to establish consistent definitions, data practices, and evidence-based prevention frameworks while preserving local control and unique school community needs. Policies must also reflect current statutory requirements identified in 16 VSA 570.
 - a) In 2025, the AOE reopened the existing model policy for HHB Prevention and Response for needed updates. Almost universally, contributors acknowledged that the existing model policy is focused



primarily on HHB Investigation and Response and does not adequately address comprehensive prevention. This policy is expected to be published as an updated Model Policy for the Prevention of HHB through Investigation and Response this spring.

- b) In addition, the AOE has proposed that model policy be divided into two separate policies and procedures. The second policy, currently under development, will more comprehensively address prevention through required annual training, age-appropriate curriculum requirements, minimum standards for caregiver and family engagement beyond investigation letters, and revised data collection and review. The existing model policy will become a subset of Prevention Policy, titled Model Policy for HHB Prevention through Investigation and Response.
2. Consideration for potential future updates to Title 16 to align to best practices and strengthen requirements for practical prevention tools, such as specific criteria for annual training and curriculum, and data practices related to HHB.
 3. State-level support and implementation assistance, including state-provided annual training for HHB intervention and best practices, investigator training, and impact of HHB on development, technical assistance and state-level resources such as templates, student and community-facing resources, visual workflows and improved data guidance, and special considerations for certain student populations, such as students with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ students.

In parallel, the Agency is advancing several strategic efforts to address in-school root causes of absenteeism, including improving student engagement and building sustainable, inclusive school climates. While these efforts are each managed as individual components of a larger vision for Vermont education, attendance is a key measure of success. H. 930 will provide the framework needed to effectively define and measure attendance, rather than act as the mechanism to address root causes of absenteeism, and as a result should not include specific provisions, including data reporting, related to specific root cause concerns.

